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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2544
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 002542

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

LONDON FOR TSOU
PARIS FOR ZEYA
DEPT FOR OES/FHA, SES_O_CMS and NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [KFLU](#) [EAGR](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: Avian Flu: Saudi Arabia Closing Small Poultry
Farms, Slaughterhouses

REFTEL: A) 2005 RIYADH 7935, B) RIYADH 0389, C)

RIYADH 0522, D) RIYADH 1484, E) JEDDAH 267, F)
JEDDAH 212, G) 2005 Riyadh 8173

¶1. (U) Summary: Meetings with the WHO representative, Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), and Ministry of Health (MOH) revealed that the SAG has established necessary preparations for avian flu, including action plans, an emergency "hotline" number, monitoring and testing sites for migratory birds, and establishment of an inter-governmental agency avian flu committee. The WHO representative in Saudi Arabia generally commended the Saudi Government's contingency plans for an avian flu outbreak, but said that an actual avian flu scenario such as a minor outbreak in Saudi Arabia was necessary to "tighten up" practical implementation of the plans. The MOA is updating its action plan based on best practices learned from other nearby countries with avian flu, including Egypt. Saudi Arabia recently added PCR testing capability in the MOA's Riyadh central lab to enable in country H5N1 testing. The MOA is also shutting down unlicensed poultry farms and closing live slaughterhouses to lower the risk of spreading a potential avian flu outbreak. End summary.

¶2. (U) Amman-based Regional Environment, S&T and Health (ESTH) Officer and Riyadh Econoff discussed avian flu with Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) General Manager for Animal Resources, Dr. Mohammad Al-Ogaily, on March 21 in Riyadh. ESTH officer and econoff also met separately with the WHO representative, Dr. Awad Mukhtar and discussed avian flu. Other health issues reported septel.

Committee on Zoonotic Diseases Was Already in Place

¶3. (U) Dr. Al-Ogaily said that the SAG had an interagency committee on zoonotic (passing from animals to humans) diseases already in place prior to development of concerns about avian flu. This committee has taken on management of the SAG's planning and preparation for avian flu.

¶4. (U) The MOA has a central lab in Riyadh and 5 regional labs around the country, including Jeddah and Jizan, Al-Ogaily said, capable of testing for the presence of the H5 virus. The central lab acquired the capability of doing polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing only in February 2006. The lab in Jizan also has PCR testing capability. The Ministry also produces animal vaccines.

Contingency Plan Updated to Reflect Best Practices

¶5. (U) The MOA zoonotic committee has created a contingency and management plan for containment of an avian flu outbreak, which was summarized in Ref A. A copy in Arabic is on the Ministry's website (www.agrwat.gov.sa) and a version in English is on the way, Al-Ogaily said. Dr. Al-Ogaily noted the immense amount of interagency coordination needed in these situations, adding that veterinary resources are scattered between several different Saudi ministries.

¶6. (U) The MOA's plan has been updated to reflect new information and lessons learned, such as how to best manage the practicalities of culling birds following an outbreak, from other countries, such as Egypt that have experienced cases of avian flu.

Public Awareness Campaign, Hotline Ongoing

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¶7. (U) The MOA contingency plan includes a section on raising public awareness of the disease and how to spot its symptoms. Al-Ogaily said that public service announcements and press stories are ongoing. The SAG has opened an avian flu hotline that is staffed 24 hours a day. He said that there has been "some panic" among the public about avian flu, reflected in phone calls to the hotline. The SAG has also prepared and distributed brochures both for the general public and for farm workers about avian flu, he said.

Migration Routes a Special Concern

¶8. (SBU) Dr. Al-Ogaily noted Saudi Arabia's location on migratory bird routes and said the SAG's avian flu planning paid special attention to monitoring wild birds along known migration routes. So far, he said, all samples had been negative. When asked about the results of the test for H5N1 on the falcons that were destroyed in January (refs B,C, and D), Dr. Al-Ogaily hid his face behind a sheaf of papers in mock embarrassment and did not respond. (Embassy comment: Al-Ogaily's chagrin was a response to econoff's numerous unanswered inquiries to the MOA on the status of the falcon cases. Although the MOA has been identified as the lead Saudi agency on avian flu, the MOA claimed it did not have the test results even weeks after the samples were sent to the UK-based lab. The Embassy eventually learned from other sources in and out of the Saudi Government that the falcons had tested negative for H5N1, but positive for the H9 strain. Although ostensibly good news, the MOA may have been hesitant to reveal the birds were not carrying the H5N1 and were put down "in error" to protect itself from royal criticism -- the falcons at issue were expensive, highly-prized possessions reportedly owned by members of the royal family. End comment.)

70% of Poultry Production Comes from Two Companies

¶9. (U) Dr. Al-Ogaily described the Saudi poultry industry as having two major players that account for roughly 70% of Saudi poultry production, with roughly 400 other small, licensed farms providing the bulk of the remaining production. He said there were perhaps another 100 unlicensed poultry farms and that the SAG is moving to close them down. Due to Saudi Arabia's harsh climate, he said, nearly 90 percent of the poultry farms are enclosed buildings that prohibit the chickens from outdoor access, thus lowering the risk of infection from wild birds. Most of the farms are in the desert, away from the cities, he added. Saudi Arabia imports day-old chicks from a number of countries including Australia, Turkey and Syria, he added, but all other imports of birds are banned. Saudi Arabia also imports frozen chicken meat from Brazil.

Reducing Proximity of Wild and Domestic Birds

¶10. (U) As part of the MOA's avian flu plan, Dr. Al-Ogaily said that poultry farms had been ordered to fill in lakes and ponds near their poultry houses, and to cut down any trees on the farms. The purpose of these measures was to reduce the number of wild birds carrying H5N1 that might land at existing poultry farms. Farms were also told to hire veterinarians to monitor flocks and have those vets report weekly to the MOA on the health of the flock. The MOA itself has also hired veterinarians to randomly monitor poultry health, a level of expertise the ministry did not have previously.

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After August 2006, No Live Slaughtering of Birds

¶11. (U) SAG issued an edict four years ago that will take final effect in August 2006 that prohibits live slaughtering of birds at neighborhood butchers. (Ref E) After that date, only frozen or chilled poultry, not freshly slaughtered birds, can be sold to consumers. Dr. Al-Ogaily noted a link between illegal farms and small slaughterhouses, and surmised that banning small slaughterhouses would result in fewer illegal farms. The SAG has also issued regulations to minimize the transportation of live birds around the country by mandating that slaughtering must be done within the same district that the bird was raised. Although this took time to implement, Al-Ogaily said, results are now good. As of August 2006, each poultry farm must have its own slaughterhouse or a contract with a slaughterhouse.

Clamping Down on Unlicensed Poultry Farms Too

¶12. (U) The SAG decreed six years ago, Al-Ogaily said, that all unlicensed poultry farming should be terminated. That edict is now being "activated," he said, and all unlicensed farms will be gone in a few months. Dr. Al-Ogaily had heard the stories (REF F) of the chickens that escaped when bulldozers destroyed coops before the chickens had been culled or relocated. He put that story down as an exaggeration, that a few chickens had escaped, which is understandable in an operation with many birds, he said. He said that he

had received a letter from the Governor of the Jeddah Governorate explaining the situation. He also noted that the farmers were given ample warning and time for them to fully raise and butcher all chickens prior to the farm destruction as a "humanitarian measure."

WHO Rep Confirms Much of MOA's Report on Avian Flu

¶13. (SBU) In a separate meeting on March 21, World Health Organization (WHO) Representative Dr. Awad Mukhtar discussed the Saudi Government's avian flu planning, including its interagency committee, which he noted has revised the Saudi Government's contingency plan several times. Dr. Mukhtar noted good cooperation now between the WHO, the USG's NAMRU-3 medical lab in Cairo, and the SAG, although the SAG was initially reluctant to accept international guidance, he said. Mukhtar said there had been Saudi workshops in Cairo and in Jeddah in which NAMRU-3 had participated. He also noted internal training programs by the SAG on avian flu, including one presented by the National Guard (Ref G). Dr. Mukhtar said that the SAG is getting the message out to the public on avian flu, and that there are high levels of public awareness. He also believed that the SAG has a good human health surveillance system, but that the country needs "a wakeup call" in order to tighten up its avian flu plans and systems before a major outbreak.